

Paris Agreement on Climate Change: U.S. Letter to United Nations

August 8, 2017

The Department of State communicated to the United Nations on August 4, 2017, a U.S. intention to withdraw from the 2016 [Paris Agreement](#) (PA). The PA is an international agreement to address climate change over the coming century existing under the 1992 U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). On June 1, 2017, [President Donald Trump](#) publicly announced this intent. The letter to the U.N. stated that “unless the United States finds suitable terms for reengagement,” it would provide formal written notification of the U.S. intent to withdraw “as soon as it is eligible to do so.” Under the terms of the PA, first eligibility would be November 4, 2019—three years after the PA entered into force for the United States. The letter also requested that the Secretary-General communicate this information to other Parties and to other countries that are entitled to become Parties to the agreement.

Because the communication does not have legal effect—given its early date—the action’s significance largely lies in what the [press release](#) relates about U.S. substantive greenhouse gas (GHG) policies. Specifically, the press release states that United States will:

- be “open to re-engaging in the Paris Agreement if the United States can identify terms that are more favorable to it, its businesses, its workers, its people, and its taxpayers”;
- continue to reduce its GHG emissions while promoting technological advance and other countries’ access to fossil fuels “more cleanly and efficiently” as well as renewable energy and “other clean energy” sources (language almost identical to text in the [joint communiqué](#) of the G-20 leaders on July 8); and
- “continue to participate in international climate change negotiations and meetings ... to protect U.S. interests and ensure all future policy options remain open to the administration.”

President Trump’s intent to withdraw from the PA, and broader questions about U.S. climate change policy, were the subject of [reportedly](#) intense discussions among leaders of the G-7 and G-20 countries at their recent respective summit meetings. The G-20 communiqué noted the U.S. intent to withdraw and the continued commitment of the other members of the G-20, stating:

[T]he Leaders of the other G20 members state that the Paris Agreement is irreversible. We reiterate the importance of fulfilling the UNFCCC commitment by developed countries in providing means of implementation including financial resources to assist developing countries with respect to both mitigation and adaptation actions.

The State Department press release indicates U.S. willingness to continue to participate in negotiations under the PA, as the United States is entitled to do as long as it remains a Party. During these negotiations,

the Parties will define the PA's rules and methods, similar to the way in which a federal agency promulgates rules and guidance to implement a statute passed by Congress. The rules to be negotiated cover such topics as common standards for reporting on GHG emissions and actions Parties are taking to reduce them, processes for public and international review of Parties' implementation of their commitments, and standards for accounting and review of financing of actions under the agreement. The content of the GHG emission reduction pledges by Parties are not legal obligations but may have political import.

For more information:

CRS Report R44761, *Withdrawal from International Agreements: Legal Framework, the Paris Agreement, and the Iran Nuclear Agreement*, by Stephen P. Mulligan

CRS In Focus IF10668, *Potential Implications of U.S. Withdrawal from the Paris Agreement on Climate Change*, by Jane A. Leggett

CRS Report R44609, *Climate Change: Frequently Asked Questions About the 2015 Paris Agreement*, by Jane A. Leggett and Richard K. Lattanzio

Author Information

Jane A. Leggett
Specialist in Energy and Environmental Policy

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